

BOOK REVIEW

The Giver of Stars by Jojo Moyes

By Donna Sievers

In today's world, we can read a book on a mobile device, by listening in the car, or the old-fashioned way with a book in your lap. It's all about the words, not the way you read them. Whether the words are a recipe from a magazine or a classic piece of inspiring literature, they bring information and amazement with a story that is often unlike our own. The process of reading brings joy and education, and challenges us to evaluate the meaning of the words and messages the author wants to express.

This understanding of the importance of reading is why I most happily recommend the novel *The Giver of Stars* by Jojo Moyes. The book takes place in the Depression era in the mountains of rural Kentucky. It's based on the historical events of the pack-horse librarians of Kentucky who made a difference in the lives of the rural community by bringing books and knowledge to those isolated in the hollows and the mountains of Kentucky.

The library books brought the gift of reading to those who were so isolated that they rarely saw anyone other than their own family members. (Our own experiences with the pandemic made the isolation of rural Americans more personal!) The women in this story rode mules and horses on their daily routes to bring books to children, to coal miners, to home-makers, to a man dying of black lung, and even to a man who was mostly drunk from homemade moonshine.

This novel is filled with love. There is the love of devoted couples, love for a child, love for colleagues who share the same values in life, and love for the beauty of the earth. The book explores the love for reading, the love you feel for the animals you depend on, and the love for the courage of friends who support us in times of hardship.

This book has it all, including stories of the coal miners and their sacrifices. The characters face the environmental impact that the coal industry imposed on the earth and on the health of the workers. The role of greed in corporate America via the "company store" and the lack of health/disability insurance for workers is brought forward, as is the role of the environmental crisis of rain and floods in rural America. These issues

bring our own climate change concerns into historical perspective.

Alice, an immigrant from England, experiences what so many first-generation immigrants experience in trying to "fit in," and reminds us that our diversity makes us stronger, more creative, and more productive. In addition, the author brings "page turner" tension to the story with a murder trial and a look at the legal system of rural Kentucky in the 1930s.

Jojo Moyes' characters in *The Giver of Stars* face the societal constraints of the 1930s and 1940s in rural America, and lead us to reflect on the same societal issues that continue to demand our attention. Alice, for example, is a victim of domestic violence, and page after page we applaud her resilience and her ability to continue her life as a survivor, not a victim.

Interestingly, the value of the books that the pack-horse librarians of Kentucky delivered had to be accepted by the community, who often did not value the role of education or the role of women in society. The women who rode the mules and horses had to first be accepted by the community before the education they were offering would be allowed. The book focuses on the not-unfamiliar lack of opportunities for women who were seen only as wives and mothers by society, for people of color, for the disabled, for the rural poor, and for women who wanted a career or an independent life for themselves.

The author fills out the stories of her characters with humor, true friendship, and humanity. It's one of those books you do not want to end, and the type of book that inspires you to do more for your friends, neighbors, and community.

I will continue to read the old-fashioned way with a book on my lap; after reading *The Giver of Stars*, I realize how grateful I am that I love to read.

Donna Sievers was raised in Long Beach and taught at Stanford Junior High, Bolsa Grande High, Pacifica High, and CSULB before leaving the classroom for administrator duties in Garden Grove USD. She and her husband live in Bluff Heights, where their retirement activities include volunteering for the Joyful Child Foundation in Memory of Samantha Runnion, gardening at the Bembridge House, bike riding, walking to the ocean, and maintaining a 107-year-old house and garden.

